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St. Thomas Airport Built for 300,000 Now Handling About 900,000, VIPA Says

With roughly 900,000 passengers moving through a terminal designed for about 300,000, VIPA says Cyril E. King Airport is under mounting operational strain as officials work to ease congestion.

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Six aircraft of major carriers at the Cyril E. King Airport By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

ST. THOMAS — The V.I. Port Authority said Wednesday that Cyril E. King Airport is operating far beyond the passenger levels it was originally designed to handle, with board members and officials describing long lines, crowding, restroom pressure and scheduling congestion as continuing challenges at the St. Thomas airport.

During the Wednesday board meeting, VIPA Executive Director Carlton Dowe said the airport was built to accommodate about 300,000 passengers but is now handling roughly 900,000. The mismatch between the original footprint of the facility and current passenger volume has created operational strain across the airport, he said.

Board members raised concerns about extensive lines and the impact the departure experience can have on visitors, particularly repeat travelers whose final impression of the territory comes at the airport. Officials said they closely monitor social media and are aware that delays and crowding can shape how travelers talk about their time in the U.S. Virgin Islands after they leave.

The executive director said the crowding problem is not simply a matter of passenger growth, but also of timing. On some days, he said, nine, 10 or 11 aircraft can be on the ground around the same time at Cyril E. King Airport, putting pressure on gates, passenger movement and screening areas.

Deputy Executive Director, Anise Hodge, said VIPA has tried to encourage airlines to spread out arrivals and departures through an incentive program that would offer relief on certain fees for carriers operating earlier in the morning or later in the evening. But airlines tend to prioritize connection windows at hub airports, making scheduling changes difficult.

Ms. Hodge also stated that VIPA is setting up meetings with airline network planners and airport partners to discuss spacing out arrivals and revisiting connection times in an effort to reduce bunching during the busiest periods.

Officials told the board that one challenge had also involved TSA equipment malfunction, which slowed passenger movement at a time when the airport was already under pressure. They said that issue has since been corrected.

While discussing possible technology improvements, a board member referenced the facial identification screening systems used in Miami and asked whether something similar could be introduced locally. Mr. Dowe responded that such systems are managed by TSA and Customs and Border Protection, and said the larger issue at Cyril E. King remains the limited amount of space available for screening and processing.

The board also discussed congestion inside the terminal itself, including crowded holding areas and pressure on restrooms and janitorial operations. One board member raised concerns about visible trash and the appearance of cleaning carts, while another said custodial staff had faced difficulty trying to close restrooms for cleaning while long lines of passengers waited to use them.

Dowe officials said they have added private cleaning support outside the terminal and recently approved additional custodians for the interior. They also said the authority has strengthened its visitor experience operations, including placing a director of visitor experience on each island.

According to Mr. Dowe, those teams help communicate with travelers during disruptions, assist stranded passengers, and work with airlines and hospitality partners to help secure hotel rooms, food and other immediate support when necessary.

He said the airport's physical constraints are rooted in the era in which it was built. When the terminal was originally designed, airport screening operations were much simpler and did not include today's TSA and CBP requirements, both of which consume significant space inside the building, the executive director made known.

Despite the strain, VIPA officials said the increase in air traffic reflects strong tourism demand and remains critical to the territory's economy. But Wednesday's discussion made clear that the authority views the present conditions as a serious operational challenge that requires continued coordination with airlines, federal agencies and airport staff.

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